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AUTHOR Grosvenor, Gilbert M.
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ABSTRACT

Knowledge of geography is fundamental to understanding many other disciplines and many of the important issues which face the world, yet it has practically disappeared from our curricula, having been swallowed and dissolved by social studies. We know about malnutrition, but we know little about where millions are dying of famine. Ignorance of geography is usually dangerous in that it can deter, frustrate, and finally defeat the best of intentions. The historical record is full of such instances, among them the British ignorance of how Americans were influenced by their environment and how they had changed in the period leading to the American Revolution, and America's ignorance of Vietnam before our involvement in the Vietnam War. The experience of Vietnam has not lessened our ignorance; today many high school graduates cannot locate Vietnam on a map. Moreover, they cannot name one African nation (except South Africa) south of the Sahara. Despite our ignorance, geographical knowledge is central not only to world affairs but also to more local matters such as deciding where to locate factories and how to market goods. In order to increase geographical awareness it is necessary to harness the advances in communications technology so that geographical information can be communicated as widely as possible to adults and children. The National Geographic Society is committed to doing this, but educators, too, must be convinced of the necessity of creating better ways to do this. (IS)

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WHAT HAPPENS WHEN AMERICA FLUNKS GEOGRAPHY

by
Gilbert M. Grosvenor

1985

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Economic Club of Detroit (Detroit, MI, April 22, 1985).

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WHAT HAPPENS WHEN AMERICA FLUNKS GEOGRAPHY

Remarks by Mr. Gilbert M. Grosvenor, President, National Geographic Society, before the Economic Club of Detroit, April 22, 1985.

It is a privilege for me to occupy this famous rostrum from which so many important and often wise words have been spoken over the years.

That sense of privilege is matched by my delight that you have invited a geographer to a sounding board noted for its economic and political vibrations. Surely, this is geography week in Detroit, and although I speak for the National Geographic Society, I am a concerned member of the Association of American Geographers. Both organizations are dedicated to the study of geography. We share a common major challenge: to dramatically upgrade geography in the K-12 schools in the United States.

Geographers don't make many vibes these days, so I especially welcome this opportunity. The Romans would say, "...lend me your ears."

Geography as you and I knew it has practically disappeared from our curricula, having been swallowed and dissolved by social studies. For example, we hear of regional synthesis, spatial interaction, relative locations, environmental perceptions, population trends. We know about malnutrition, but we know very little about <u>where</u> millions are dying of famine. What about climate, soil erosion, water tables, and tribal customs?

My guess is that not one student in ten, or maybe a hundred, could draw for us a map of the <u>Sahel</u>, that region in West Africa lying along the southern margin of the Sahara. Even fewer could tell us of the peoples who live there; the physical conditions of long-term drought that they have faced for a decade and more; the political changes that have disturbed the neighborhoods of the Sahel like Mali, Niger, and Chad; the horrendous difficulties encountered in distributing emergency food to the places where starvation is at its worst; the prevailing graft that short-stops some of it, and so on.

Ignorance of geography is usually dangerous in that it can deter, frustrate, and finally defeat the best of intentions.

That may seem unfair of me, of course. The social sciences are designed to give students a broad and general acquaintance with other cultures of the world. <u>Excellent</u>. I am all for it. But the basic building block of geography <u>must</u> be restored to the primary and secondary school curriculum. Just as you can't fathom differential calculus until you have passed introductory calculus, which demands a background in algebra, which requires mastery of addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, which requires a knowledge of numbers! Today, in geography, students can't even find their <u>fingers</u>, much less the numbers.

Such ignorance of the geographic world can be fatal.

It proved fatal to royal ambitions when King George III of England recorded one of the first "F's" in American geography. He treated his distant colonial cousins as midland Englishmen, when a good geographer like Edmund Burke could have told him, <u>and</u> <u>tried</u>, that these Englishmen had become something else--Americans.

They had become Americans because isolation from home, adaptation to a new environment, learning to cope with native Indian peoples, exploitation of different resources, invention of new modes of travel and communication, had made them so. Virginia was not The Netherlands or Ireland, and the Atlantic was not the English Channel.

So, an "F" for George and an "A" for Americans like Ben Franklin.

Other failures in geography have had terrible consequences for our nation.

Governments and settlers applied the lessons and environmental laws of America east-of-the-Mississippi to the arid lands west of the 100th meridian and helped cause any number of social disasters like the Dust Bowl of the 1930s and expensive aggravations such as the fight over Colorado River water.

The mood then--and by many even today--was to build whether the ground perks or not, and to irrigate it if it doesn't, and to build eastern-type suburbs in the middle of the desert. We are waiting to pay that piper--and that day draws ever closer as the water table recedes lower and lower like a barometer before the inevitable storm. Well before the end of this century the Sun Belt could easily become the Thirst Belt. Many developers will have flunked geography.

More recently and tragically, our lengthy war in Southeast Asia sometimes made King George look like a Ph.D.

We began that war in Vietnam picking up the pieces of a French colonialism that was dead even as we discovered Southeast Asia. After Dien Bien Phu (remember that fateful battle 30 years ago) "Washington"--ignoring history and geography--dove into Vietnam to save it against the expansion of Communism into Southeast Asia. We continued the folly even after learning that the Vietnamese and the Chinese have been--and still are--historical enemies, whether both are Communist or not. Geography would have taught us that the artificial boundaries of Vietnam that split asunder strong tribes--Tonkinese, lowlanders, and Montagnards--would never work. We ultimately abandoned the war, leaving behind, intact, the world's third largest air force, plus incredible arms for the victors to turn upon traditional enemy neighbors in a slaughter that still rages.

An "F" in geography clearly helped trigger our original involvement.

And what did we learn from the most divisive, controversial conflict in America's history--perhaps excepting the Civil War? Today--ten years later--95% of the incoming freshmen at a nearby college couldn't even find Vietnam on the map!

Today, America risks flunking geography again.

Take South Africa. The current wave of interest is to influence the government of South Africa to end its system of racial separation, to end white superiority, and to institute a one-man, one-vote constitution. A just cause, to be sure. College students, as they should be, are at the forefront in the anti-apartheid, anti-South African government crusade.

It seems to be a simple question of black and white and no gray, but it is not. The blacks of South Africa are diverse. They are Zulu, Xhosa, Ndebele,

Tswana, South Sotho--each group with its own language, its own history and tradition that often pits one or more against the others, its own traditional system of government and authority.

There are Afrikaner whites and English whites, and an open English press that belabors the Afrikaner government. There are realists and dreamers and martyrs on all sides.

There is wealth in abundance, and a labor system to extract it, and external arrangements with other nations that often involve United States interests in other parts of the world.

So, the slaying of the dragon of apartheid will involve a great deal more than riding up to it on a white horse. The man who rides had better know his geography and not make the truly dangerous blunder of equating race relations in South Africa with those in the United States. I call it dangerous because it is a blunder of ignorance.

Is America <u>really</u> knowledgeable about Africa? Are our demonstrating college students really informed? I fear not. A recent survey at the University of North Carolina disclosed that 74% of the students could not name one--I repeat, one--of the more than 30 countries south of the Sahara, north of South Africa. Another "F" in geography--we can't even find our fingers to start building a knowledge of geography.

The issues requiring geographic skills are not just political and social but economic as well. Because geographic illiterates build nuclear power plants on earthquake fault lines, investors have learned what junk bonds are all about.

Perhaps not all CEOs in this room might pass a quiz in good old-fashioned geography, but they run successful enterprises. At the same time, my guess would be that they deal in geography <u>constantly</u> but call it by other names; in fact, it is a prejudice of mine that successful decision-making implies an ability to deal with geographic concepts.

Example: Where is the Saturn plant going?

This is a case lesson in economic geography. Consider the simple prime needs: transportation, long-term water supply, land availability, predictable weather and wind patterns. Consider the ones that follow: skill level of the work force, nearby universities with good engineering departments, living environment and educational facilities for employees, tax incentives, nature of local government.

Consider the next ring of questions: Impact on the environment, access to markets, et cetera.

How about marketing the car once it is built? Marketing is the application of geographic knowledge to determine the acceptability of a product, and then to increase its sale. It begs the questions: Where do potential customers live; how can we communicate with them?

<u>All</u> that goes into answering those questions is outright geography or employs geographic ideas--settlement patterns, income distributions, demographic profiles--I could go on for hours!

Every successful new product has behind it managers who have scored an "A" in geography, whether they knew it or not.

So here I am haranguing you about kings and presidents and students flunking geography, but the National Geographic Society has been in business for almost 100 years and, from my own testimony, we have labored apparently with moderate success to educate our 10.5 million members about geography. Without question we have failed in the schools.

I confess to disappointment but not to defeat. We have found the path through the school systems a particularly arduous one. We are currently subsidizing our PBS Television Specials, cable TV, and the school curriculum films some five million dollars each year.

We are swimming against the natural inclination to kick off one's shoes and say: "Look, I don't care to know where the Sahel is! I don't want to know about South Africa. I don't give a damn where the Saturn plant goes."

But we have to change that. The Geographic and the AAG are committed to upgrading America's awareness of geography--but we will need your help--you knew that was coming!

In America the TV image--the moving image--has so dominated our culture during the past three decades that we have become insensitive, unresponsive, perhaps immune to traditional learning techniques. Ah television! Tne Dukes of Hazard teach our youngsters that everyone can safely drive a car off a cliff; every night on TV we learn that shoot-outs with the cops are recess fun, and Hollywood assures us that sleeping with one's teacher is a requirement for graduation. How can geography endure that kind of competition? As it is presently taught, it can't--neither can math, neither can Herodotus, neither can English composition.

The moving image is here to stay. Therefore we must harness that image and use it constructively. If you can't fight 'em, join 'em. It can be done; it must be done--or we will be done. At the National Geographic Society we prove that geography for adults, anyway, can be fun, stimulating, and successful. I am convinced that creative, innovative teachers--trained in audiovisual techniques as well as traditional teaching skills--can teach American youngsters geography.

I just think that we fumbled, dropped the ball, and are behind at the half and that we must review and revise the game plan again. We must utilize the incredible 20th-century communication advances available to us. From Bell and Marconi to Sputnik took half a century. Yet within the past decade we have advanced our communications capability to where we can transmit the entire Bible anywhere on the globe in three seconds; we can cram every National Geographic Magazine since 1889 into one video disk; we are assured that very soon the entire Library of Congress could be available in a filing cabinet in any school. But therein lies the problem: What are we going to transmit? Clearly our primary and secondary schools and teachers, in general, are ill-trained, poorly equipped, dreadfully underfinanced, and sometimes--but not often--unwilling to learn new techniques. I am absolutely convinced that just as 19th-century teaching techniques would have been ineffective in the 1950s, those techniques, in turn, which worked in the fifties fail miserably today.

Consider my earlier example: For more than 18 months newspapers reported almost daily about the devastating drought and famine across a wide belt of central Africa. The American people responded with apathy until an enterprising fund raiser photographed in vivid, moving color images of walking skeletons and dying children. During the past 18 months more Africans have died of starvation per hour than all those people killed by police bullets a few weeks ago 2,000 miles to the south in South Africa. Perhaps even worse are the hundreds of thousands of drought victims who survive with severe permanent brain damage from prenatal and infant malnutrition. Africa will face a generation of despair providing for those who partially survived.

Our very senses of visual emotions have become so dulled by the constant barrage of high-tech video. The message is clear. If we can't compete for students' attention with conventional methodology, we must join the high-tech revolution. We must upgrade teaching to meet our rapidly changing times.

At the National Geographic Society we will vigorously pursue disseminating geography as an important primary discipline to be acquired by American youngsters. Hopefully, we can meld our visual images with professional geographers' curriculum materials. Hopefully, we will successfully convince educators that geography is critical for a balanced educational program. In addition, we are pursuing geographic entertainment, oriented to the household--such as geography video-computer games, geography card games, et cetera. As an experiment we are distributing to youngsters 100,000 beach-ball globes identical to the ones here today. Recently we initiated an ambitious three-hour Sunday-evening cable TV program on the Nickelodeon channel. So far, IBM, Chrysler, and Ford have generously committed advertising money to this project.

But this approach just addresses the tip of the iceberg. To raise the geographic knowledge of primary and secondary youths just to the level of our European and Canadian cousins is a monumental undertaking. Clearly we have demonstrated the weakness. Now we--all of us--must build innovative, bright, punchy, richly illustrated, fast-moving programs to teach geography. Among our most difficult tasks will be to convince education administrators and teachers that geography deserves appropriate time in the classroom. Reeducating some primary and secondary teachers to use new techniques will require tact, money, time, and infinite patience. But we can do it. If the multiple talents and resources just in this room today could be harnessed, we would be well on our way to restoring geography in America.

As the National Geographic Society approaches its 100th birthday in 1988 we will focus on just this topic as a major anniversary goal. We will extend our resources--both financial and editorial--as far as possible. I am confident that AAG members--the brightest and the best in America--will eagerly join with us. But our combined financial resources will fall far short.

I urge you--who represent the best in corporate America--to join our crusade. A knowledge of geography will be critical to your managers of tomorrow. But, of greatest importance, our children and America will benefit the most. And that, of course, is the name of the game.